

3. Nicaraguan food policy: between self-sufficiency and dependency

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During the celebrations for World Food Day 2015 in Nicaragua, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) representative, Verónica Guerrero Rodríguez, highlighted the fact that by significantly reducing malnutrition, Nicaragua was among the few countries to have achieved the first UN Millennium Goal.¹ In fact, the percentage of undernourished people in the country had decreased from 54.4 per cent in 1990 to 16.6 per cent in 2015.² After Daniel Ortega returned to power in 2006, the government launched a number of programmes to improve the country's nutritional situation, such as the Zero Hunger Program and the Healthy Patios Project. Some of these projects revived concepts from the early 1980s, when the Sandinistas had adopted a highly ambitious food policy that attracted the attention of the international nutrition community. The Sandinista government's apparent success since 2006 contrasts sharply with the deterioration of the Sandinista food policy in the late 1980s. By 1990, when the Sandinistas lost the elections, the nutritional situation in the country was disastrous.

In this chapter, I argue that the Sandinistas' continuous struggle with economic dependency impeded the revolutionaries' attempts to make Nicaragua more self-sufficient. Despite the reforms of the early 1980s, including a new food distribution system, agrarian reform and price regulation, food production did not advance as quickly as the revolutionaries had hoped. Consequently, Nicaragua continued to depend on food imports and, when foreign exchange became scarce, relied increasingly on food aid. With the looming economic crisis in the mid 1980s, the gap between political propaganda and social realities increased. The Contra War and the US economic blockade, as well as the Sandinistas' political strategies in the countryside, contributed to shortages that undermined the self-sufficiency project. In the end, the Sandinista government opted for a strategy of 'economic adjustment' which reversed some of the

- 1 The aim of this Millennium Goal was to halve the proportion of people suffering from hunger between 1990 and 2015.
- 2 H. Montez Rugama, 'FAO elogia lucha contra el hambre', *El Nuevo Diario*, 8 Oct. 2015.

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important social reforms of the early 1980s. By 1988, hunger was back in Nicaragua, when average caloric intakes fell below the levels documented by nutritional surveys in 1953–54.³

Some researchers have argued that the disastrous nutritional situation was the result of neoliberal economic policies in the early 1990s.⁴ This chapter, however, proposes a somewhat different interpretation. The failure to guarantee Nicaraguans a stable food supply in the second half of the 1980s contributed to the demise of the Sandinista Revolution. The disastrous nutritional situation then worsened further with the elimination of free healthcare, the introduction of neoliberal economic policies, and the neglect of small landholders by the post-1990 Unión Nacional Opositora (UNO) government. Despite a slight reduction in the late 1990s, poverty rates remained extremely high until 2005, when they were 48.3 per cent, and then began to decrease from 2006 onwards.⁵

Despite the setbacks of the 1980s, the revolutionary experience laid the foundations for an approach to food policy that is, in some ways, distinctive. The Sandinista Revolution left a legacy of peasant networks that reorganised in the 1990s and mobilised for improvements in the Nicaraguan countryside. The Nicaraguan section of La Vía Campesina (LVC) evolved out of these networks and campaigned for a food sovereignty law in Nicaragua.

Although the food sovereignty approach reprised some important elements of the Sandanistas' 1980s food policy, the new setting is different. The Ortega government is unwilling to challenge the private sector and has therefore subordinated demands for the restriction of food imports to the regulations of trade agreements. While several of the new programmes resemble the 1980s projects in name, they are conducted in a different political context: the new *caudillismo* or 'populist left regime with hybrid economic features'⁶ that Ortega has established in Nicaragua since 2007. In this chapter, I evaluate Sandinista food policy across three periods: the expansive, ambitious food policy of the

3 M. Flores et al., 'Estudios dietéticos en Nicaragua: I. Municipio de San Isidro, Departamento de Matagalpa'; M. Flores, 'Estudios dietéticos en Nicaragua: II. Barrio de San Luis, Ciudad de Managua'.

4 S. Linkogle, 'Soya, culture and international food aid: the case of a Nicaraguan communal kitchen', 97; W. Godek, 'The institutionalization of food sovereignty, PhD diss., Rutgers University, 2014, 164–5.

5 Poverty decreased from 50.3 per cent of the population in 1993 to 47.9 per cent in 1998 to 45.8 per cent in 2001. R. Spalding, 'Poverty politics', 221–2; A. Acevedo Vogl, 'Estamos en un punto de inflexión y deberíamos preocuparnos', *Envío*, no. 404, Nov. 2015. The last survey on living standards conducted by INIDE (Instituto Nacional de Información de Desarrollo) claimed that poverty had decreased from 42.5 per cent in 2009 to 29.6 per cent in 2014. However, economist Adolfo Acevedo Vogl criticised the definition of poverty used by the survey (i.e. daily expenditure of less than US\$1.81), suggesting it was too low. The World Bank has amended its definition of poverty for Latin America to include all those with a daily expenditure of less than US\$4. In addition, INIDE has not published the database for the survey. A FIDEG (Fundación Internacional para el Desafío Económico Global) survey concluded that in 2013 the poverty level was still 40.5 per cent of the population. FIDEG, 'Dinámicas de la pobreza en Nicaragua 2009–2013', 2014, 4.

6 R.J. Spalding, *Contesting Trade in Central America: Market Reform and Resistance*, 208.

first years after the revolution (1979–82), the period of crisis and adjustment (1984–8) and the period of erosion (1988–90). In the last section, I discuss continuities and discontinuities in the neo-Sandinista food policy after 2007. Research on food sovereignty in Nicaragua has provided important insights into the politics around food during the last decade. Nevertheless, I propose that there is a need for a broader analysis which incorporates agrarian change, consumption and food distribution to explain both the reduction of malnutrition and its continuing prevalence in rural Nicaragua today.

Initial euphoria, 1979–82

The slogan ‘Let’s all sow the land’, which appeared on a Nicaraguan Food Program poster, called on people to participate in food production. The illustration shows a peasant couple with the man holding his machete triumphantly aloft, while the woman holds a basket of vegetables on her arm. This poster formed part of early Sandinista campaigns to increase food production in Nicaragua.⁷ Projects in the early 1980s set ambitious goals: the aim was to reach self-sufficiency by 1982 – and this in a country where food imports had increased significantly in the decades prior to revolution.

‘It may be concluded that the theme of FOOD and especially that of National Food Self-Sufficiency and Food Security is considered to have a very high political priority in contemporary Nicaragua’ was how Otto van Teutem, FAO representative in Nicaragua, ended his report on World Food Day in 1982.⁸ His statement demonstrates that the international organisations working in Nicaragua also saw the new energy with which the Sandinistas were pursuing their revolutionary food policy. It aimed at guaranteeing a basic food supply to all Nicaraguans and was based on four pillars: 1) the increase of basic grain production; 2) the promotion of local food consumption; 3) the democratisation of the supply system; and 4) the regulation of prices. Up to 1982, the revolutionaries created new institutions, invested more resources, developed ambitious production schemes and launched broad-based education campaigns. In general, the Sandinistas promoted a ‘mixed economy’, with three sectors: private enterprise, mixed firms and a state sector. In contrast with other revolutionary regimes, they refrained from a complete nationalisation of production.⁹

During the period of initial euphoria, the Sandinistas introduced credits for basic grain producers, democratised the supply system, and mobilised people to consume locally produced food. The new distribution network, managed by the Empresa Nacional de Alimentos Básicos (ENABAS), included popular stores, rural distribution points and popular supermarkets. External aggression

7 The poster is reprinted in O. Núñez Soto, ‘Unser Land: unsere Revolution’, 104.

8 O. van Teutem, ‘Report on World Food Day 1982 – Nicaragua, 2 Nov. 1982’. ESH WFD IN 4/9 NIC, FAO Archives.

9 R. Sola Montserrat, *Un siglo y medio de economía nicaragüense: las raíces del presente*, 54–55; J. Austin, et al., ‘The role of the revolutionary state in the Nicaraguan food system’.

played a key role in expanding these ambitious reforms. Shortly after taking over the US presidency in January 1981, Ronald Reagan announced that his government would cancel credits for wheat imports from Nicaragua. Soon afterwards, in May 1981, the Sandinistas launched the Nicaraguan Food Program (PAN) to coordinate Nicaragua's new food policy.¹⁰ The cancellation of the wheat credits also sparked the first campaign to promote corn as an anti-imperialist, revolutionary food. The campaigns included visual references, Mesoamerican legends, cooking competitions and songs. The first corn festivals mobilised thousands of Nicaraguans around local food security.¹¹ More than 30 years later my interviewees remembered the campaigns with enthusiasm.¹² At the same time, government propaganda increasingly promoted the aim of self-sufficiency. In late 1981, PAN director Pedro Antonio Blandón announced that Nicaragua planned to reach self-sufficiency in basic grains by 1982.¹³ To stimulate food production in the cities, the Sandinistas also launched an urban gardening campaign.

The global nutrition community observed Nicaraguan efforts with interest. After the world food crisis in the early 1970s, there was intense debate about the correct approach to global nutritional problems. The Sandinista revolutionaries attracted attention because they prioritised basic grain production and seemed willing to change land distribution structures as well as invest resources in improving the nutrition of the poor. Consequently, the FAO, WHO and UNICEF financed a large number of nutritional projects during the 1980s. Their work, as well as the general interest shown in Nicaragua's policy, attracted many people from the nutritional community to the country. They combined work at Sandinista institutions with research on the food system. For example, Solon Barraclough the US economist and UN Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) director, initiated a collaboration that shaped the work of the Nicaraguan research centre, Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios de la Reforma Agraria (CIERA).¹⁴ Conceived of as a research institution to support agrarian reform and food policy, the centre applied UNRISD's food system methodology in many of its surveys.

As the Sandinista government began to cooperate closely with the FAO in the early 1980s, food security was incorporated in Nicaraguan policy. Moreover, the FAO supported several projects under its Food Security Assistance Program.¹⁵

10 Although the programme's symbol was the corncob, the organisation's acronym is the Spanish word for bread.

11 *Barricada*, 'Xilonem, respuesta y compromiso', 12 May 1981, 3.

12 Interview, María Josefina Gurdíán Mántica (Doña Piñita), Managua, Aug. 2012. Interview, Rosario Montes Orozco, León, Sept. 2012.

13 P. Candia, 'El proyecto PAN trascendencia y obstáculos', *Barricada*, 20 June 1981, 3; *Barricada*, 'Consigna del PAN, producir', 22 June 1981, 1, 7; *Barricada*, 'Blandón evalúa 5 meses del PAN', 28 Sept. 1981, 1, 5; *Barricada*, 'PAN, unificar políticas en 1982', 16 Dec. 1981, 5.

14 S. Barraclough, *A Preliminary Analysis of the Nicaraguan Food System* (Genf, 1982).

15 E. Saouma to J. Wheelock, 1 Sept. 1981. FA 13/1 FSAS ODG Old, FAO Archives.

At international conferences, Nicaragua suggested the establishment of a regional Food Security Council built on Latin American solidarity and intra-regional trade.¹⁶ In internal political debates, however, the concept of self-sufficiency remained more significant. In 1987, the Nicaraguan Constitution addressed the issue of food security, asserting the right of Nicaraguans to be protected against hunger, backed up by state guarantees for adequate availability and equitable distribution.¹⁷ In the political discourse of Nicaragua in the 1980s, the term 'food sovereignty' did not appear. However, some elements of Sandinista food policy anticipated demands subsequently raised by the food sovereignty movement. These were the emphasis on local consumption and production, agrarian reform, and the right to define the local food system autonomously.¹⁸

The first publications by international experts reflected contemporary enthusiasm and presented Nicaragua as a model for other countries of the Global South. For example, Joseph Collins, founder of the US initiative Food First, held up Nicaragua as a model for countries that lacked large budget resources for their food policy.¹⁹ James Austin et al. concluded that 'in spite of extremely adverse circumstances ... the Sandinista Revolution has made significant achievements in the areas of food policy and agricultural development'.²⁰ However, the experts were also aware that these ambitious projects faced enormous challenges.

The new food policy faced two main obstacles: first, the structure of the Nicaraguan economy was highly dependent on agro exports, and, second, the policies of the Somoza dictatorship had reinforced this dependency. In particular, cotton cultivation had expanded in Pacific Nicaragua, taking up the best soils from the 1950s on. By contrast, basic grain production had moved to the inferior soils of the Nicaraguan interior.²¹ When the Sandinistas came to power in July

16 FAO, *Report of the Seventeenth FAO Regional Conference for Latin America: Managua, 30 August to 10 September 1982*.

17 Article 63: 'Es derecho de los nicaragüenses estar protegidos contra el hambre. El Estado promoverá programas que aseguren una adecuada disponibilidad de alimentos y una distribución equitativa de los mismos', Constitución política de 1987, <http://legislacion.asamblea.gob.ni/normaweb.nsf/bbe90a5bb646d50906257265005d21f8/8339762d0f427a1c062573080055fa46?OpenDocument>

18 See, e.g., the 2016 definition on La Vía Campesina's homepage: 'Food sovereignty prioritises local food production and consumption. It gives a country the right to protect its local producers from cheap imports and to control production. It ensures that the rights to use and manage lands, territories, water, seeds, livestock and biodiversity are in the hands of those who produce food and not of the corporate sector. Therefore, the implementation of genuine agrarian reform is one of the top priorities of the farmer's movement': <https://web.archive.org/web/20160305031659/http://viacampesina.org/en/index.php/organisation-mainmenu-44>.

19 Solon Barraclough argued similarly that 'the Nicaraguan experience in dealing with its food problems will probably be highly relevant for some other Central American countries'. *A Preliminary Analysis*, 11.

20 Austin et al., 'The role of the revolutionary state'; 35.

21 Between 1960 and 1979, cotton exports increased by 381 per cent, beef exports by 335 per cent and sugar exports by 349 per cent. B.N. Biondi-Morra, *Revolución y política alimentaria: Un análisis crítico de Nicaragua*, 49, 57–9; Sola Montserrat, *Un siglo y medio*, 29, 35–9; J.A. Booth, *The End and the Beginning: The Nicaraguan Revolution*, 60–6.

1979, the initial situation they faced was unfavourable. The civil war of the late 1970s had brought food production to a standstill, making food supply during the insurreccional period difficult. Consequently, the revolutionary government's first priority was to resume food production.

In the countryside, many peasants hoped that agrarian reform would follow immediately after the revolution, allowing them to produce on their own land. However, the first wave of Sandinista expropriation favoured large state farms instead of individual peasant production. In 1979, the Sandinistas transformed the enterprise and landholdings of the Somoza family and National Guard officers into state enterprises that would continue export production to earn foreign currency but would also increase basic grain production to ensure local supply. By contrast, after the enactment of the first agrarian reform law in 1981, land distributions proceeded slowly. During the first period up to 1984, cooperatives benefited most, receiving more than 80 per cent of all distributed land. Many peasants who had dreamt for a long time of possessing their own land felt betrayed.²² At the same time, relations between peasants and ENABAS suffered from problems concerning the new system of guaranteed prices the latter had introduced. For example, peasants considered prices offered for basic grains to be too low as inflation was on the rise. Next, trading with ENABAS had its disadvantages because the enterprise paid by cheque instead of cash. Since local banks could not always cash cheques, this often meant that peasants had to travel further afield.²³

Although theoretically basic grain production took absolute priority, the need for foreign exchange undermined the food policy agenda. The Nicaraguan economy depended strongly on the export of cotton, coffee and sugar, the result of which was that the government had to support their production in order to secure foreign currency. The resources assigned to agro-export enterprises meant that basic grain production received insufficient assistance, because of the general scarcity of agricultural inputs. In addition, export agriculture and basic grain production also competed for labour.²⁴

The first evaluations by the Sandinistas of the new food policy showed mixed results: agricultural production still faced difficulties, as Figure 1 below demonstrates. In particular, corn production had declined after 1978. Although it recovered with the 1980/81 harvest, corn production did not reach pre-war levels again until the late 1980s. The production of beans and rice also recovered in the early 1980s, but not sufficiently to keep up with the increasing demands of a growing population. This gap is reflected in the first surveys on post-revolutionary consumption.

22 E. Dore, 'The great grain dilemma. Peasants and state policy in revolutionary Nicaragua', 102–4, 115–17; E. Baumeister, *Estructura y reforma agraria en Nicaragua (1979–1989)*, 123.

23 A.H. Saulniers, 'State trading organizations in expansion: a case study of ENABAS', 119; S. Martí i Puig, 'The origins of the peasant-Contra rebellion in Nicaragua, 1979–87', 12.

24 L.J. Enríquez, *Harvesting Change: Labor and Agrarian Reform in Nicaragua 1979–1990*, 84–5.

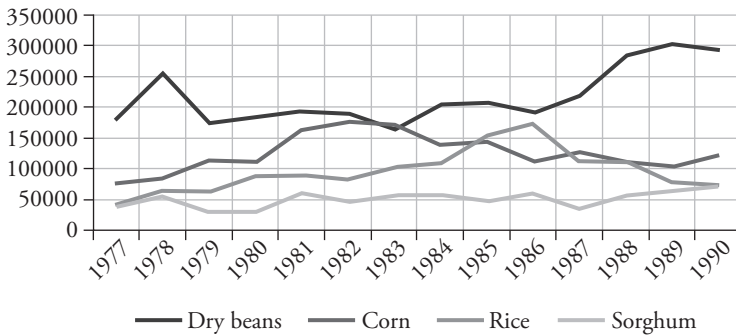


Figure 3.1. Basic grain production, 1977–90 (in t).

Surveys conducted in the early 1980s reveal the mixed results of the Sandinista food policy: despite increasing per capita consumption of basic foodstuffs, people judged their nutritional situation to be worse after the revolution. It must be noted that the surveys encountered many difficulties, such as the limited availability of updated statistical data on the population, basic grain production and income. CIERA's first investigation in 1982 into popular consumption in ten Managuan districts revealed discontent among the inhabitants. Taking meat as the main indicator of good nutrition, more than 40 per cent of the interviewees contended that their nutrition had worsened in the previous two years and only 8 per cent believed that their diets were better.²⁵ While this was certainly true in terms of meat consumption, the supply of rice, wheat flour and eggs had improved.²⁶ The supply of basic foods also increased as the government subsidised the cost of basic grains, sugar, milk and vegetable oil until 1984. It was the first time in Nicaraguan history that a government had distributed subsidised food on such a large scale.²⁷

Throughout the 1980s, revolutionary propaganda revalorised traditional Nicaraguan food against imported ingredients and processed food. Contemporary surveys on consumption indicate limited success, however. In the early 1980s, people in the poor districts of Managua still spent considerable

25 Centro de Investigación y Estudios de la Reforma Agraria (CIERA), *Distribución y consumo popular de alimentos en Managua*, 78.

26 *Barricada* published data on per capita consumption between 1977 and 1982, based on MIDINRA (Ministerio de Desarrollo Agropecuario y Reforma Agraria) and MICOIN (Ministerio de Comercio Interior) data. These statistics show a decline in per capita milk consumption while other data indicate an improvement. In general, statistical information from the revolutionary years is sometimes contradictory. Especially in the years of economic crisis, the scope of surveys remained limited. See C.M. Vilas, 'Nicaragua. I. Scientific research in a revolutionary setting. The case of Nicaragua', 11–13, 54–55.

27 Data on rural consumption are scarce, but the few existing surveys indicate that peasants could supply themselves with meat and basic grains. However, the lack of tools and the other means necessary to undertake daily work affected their living conditions and prompted discontent.

sums of money on processed food such as Maggi soup or biscuits. Similarly, the demand for milk powder remained high throughout the 1980s.²⁸ The government promoted fish as a healthy alternative to meat, frescos beverages instead of soft drinks, and corn instead of wheat. In the early 1980s people attended corn festivals in large numbers, started urban gardening projects and developed creative substitutes for scarce products. Nevertheless, it proved difficult to make comprehensive changes to Nicaraguans' consumption habits. Some advances were made with the introduction of new staples such as soy and potatoes, production of which was stimulated by development projects, and to an extent their consumption improved local diets during the crisis of the late 1980s.²⁹

By the time CIERA published the results of the consumer survey in 1983, the situation in Nicaragua had worsened: from 1981, the US began supporting armed opponents of the revolution – the Contras – who attacked Nicaragua from their bases on its borders. The Contra War demanded resources that could otherwise have been spent on social projects. It also affected basic grain production: in the war zones storage and infrastructure were destroyed and peasants displaced.³⁰ Worse still, prices of Nicaragua's most important export products on the world markets fell, which led to a deep financial crisis.

Ongoing dependency and the turn to economic adjustment, 1984–8

With the Contra War and the looming financial crisis, dependency and scarcity became ever more visible in Nicaraguan society. By 1985, military expenditure made up 50 per cent of the national budget. Due to US pressure, many international financial institutions had blocked funding for Nicaragua. At the same time, prices for agrarian export products remained low, which exacerbated the scarcity of foreign currency. There had been shortages of basic grains since the early 1980s, reinforced by natural disaster, but in 1984 the situation worsened. The Nicaraguan economy became a 'shortage economy'³¹ and this had many negative consequences for Nicaraguan consumers, who had to bear the time-consuming search for food and the erosion of real wages. Long lines formed outside shops and frequently consumers were unable to acquire basic products

28 Centro de Investigación y Estudios de la Reforma Agraria, *Distribución y consumo popular*, 12–13.

29 On potatoes, see Evaluación externa. Retrospectiva y prospectiva del proyecto agropecuario MAG-COSUDE. Estelí, Nicaragua, 10–22 June 1991. E2025A#2002/145#2338, Bundesarchiv Bern; on soy, see H. Simon, 'Probleme und Perspektiven von Frauenförderung vor dem sozio-ökonomischen Hintergrund Nicaraguas', 128–48.

30 T.W. Walker, *Nicaragua: Living in the Shadow of the Eagle*, 92–5.

31 The term was coined by the economist János Kornai, who analysed the historical development of economies in central, eastern and south-eastern Europe from the 1950s. It refers to chronic shortage of important goods as a result of the economy's structure. B. Tomka, *A Social History of Twentieth Century Europe*, 242. Even if the Nicaraguan economy was not entirely planned, structural problems caused the lack of products available to consumers.

such as sugar, wheat, toilet paper or soap. In 1984, Managuan supermarkets reported the first violent protests by consumers, who smashed windows to gain access to food.³² Simultaneously, black markets witnessed rapid growth. In Managua, informal trade was concentrated at the largest Managuan market, the Oriental, where speculators offered scarce goods at exorbitant prices. By 1984, the Sandinistas had intensified control measures, for example, by introducing a consumer card system for the distribution of rice, beans, salt, sugar, corn, oil, soap and matches.

As outlined above, agricultural production had not advanced sufficiently to guarantee a basic grain supply to all Nicaraguans. By 1983, the lack of foreign currency further undermined production as the government was facing serious difficulties in importing necessary agricultural inputs, such as tools and fertilisers. This shortage was particularly acute for technology-based crops, such as rice, whose production fell significantly between 1983 and 1986. The growing dependency on imports and food aid went, paradoxically, hand in hand with a radicalisation of the discourse on self-sufficiency. For instance, the FSLN newspaper *Barricada* characterised urban gardens as 'trenches against hunger'.³³ In illustrations, peasants' tools were portrayed as weapons, which is indicative of the militarisation of political propaganda in the mid 1980s.³⁴

A closer look at rural communities reveals, however, that the countryside did not fight unconditionally at the Sandinistas' side, either in the military conflict or in agricultural production.³⁵ This was the result of the contradictory Sandinista agrarian policy during the early revolutionary years. The Agrarian Reform Law resulted in very little land being distributed to small peasants, because Sandinista elites at the agriculture ministry favoured large-scale agriculture. They designed huge, spectacular projects that failed to address Nicaraguan realities.³⁶ By contrast, advocates of a small peasants strategy formed the majority at CIERA, but their arguments were not heard until it became apparent that more peasants were supporting the Contras. By the mid 1980s, the Sandinistas had accelerated land distribution, were paying higher prices for basic grains, and had implemented a new rural supply network.³⁷

To alleviate the general supply situation, the government relied increasingly on external food aid, a trend set in 1981, when more than 77.3 million tons of food were received. Throughout the decade, wheat, corn and rice were the most

32 *Barricada*, 'Abastecimiento irregular en barrio Bello Horizonte', 17 Aug. 1984, 10.

33 Translation from Spanish original. *Barricada*, 'Huertos: lucha contra el hambre y el bloqueo', 3 June 1985, 3.

34 See, e.g., *Barricada*, 'Trabajo y defensa ... un solo frente de combate', 10 June 1985, 8.

35 I.A. Luciak, *The Sandinista Legacy: Lessons from a Political Economy in Transition*, 123–4; L. Horton, *Peasants in Arms: War and Peace in the Mountains of Nicaragua*, 1979–1994, 158–60.

36 S. Ramírez, *Adiós Muchachos: A Memoir of the Sandinista Revolution*, 168. Joseph Collins had expressed similar fears in the mid 1980s in *Nicaragua: Was hat sich durch die Revolution verändert? Agrarreform und Ernährung im neuen Nicaragua*, with the assistance of F. Moore Lappé et al., 148–51.

37 Luciak, *The Sandinista Legacy*, 124–31; E. Baumeister, 'Agrarian reform', 239–40.

important donated products. This made it possible to guarantee supply quotas at times of difficulty, but it also silently undermined Nicaragua's policy of becoming more independent from external aid. Between 1982 and 1984, western European governments, Canada and the European Economic Community (EEC) provided large amounts of aid, while food donations from socialist countries increased significantly after 1983, and had become the most important source of aid by 1984.³⁸ This reflects a general shift in external aid for the revolutionary project. On the one hand, the United States exercised diplomatic pressure that made even strong allies cave in to their demands. On the other, early enthusiasm was fading. Some European governments criticised Sandinista policy as undemocratic and thus reduced their economic aid considerably.³⁹ Although, owing to Socialist support, the total amount of aid remained more or less stable, Sandinista leaders were continuously seeking to acquire new sources, which also meant adapting to donors' agendas.⁴⁰ For example, the Sandinistas never publicly criticised the FAO and incorporated the international organisation's self-image into Sandinista political propaganda. In the end, food aid strengthened the demand for wheat products and powdered milk, which further weakened the self-sufficiency project. In spite of some voices expressing concern about external dependency, in most cases the Sandinistas glorified the aid in public ceremonies as a way of demonstrating their strong international reputation. For example, while they idealised East German food aid as an expression of proletarian internationalism, archival documentation reveals a clear struggle for influence in Cold War terrain.⁴¹ Moreover, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) hoped to acquire Nicaraguan export products, such as coffee, that could help to alleviate its supply problems.⁴² As the economic crisis became ever more visible, GDR consultants commented critically on the lack of adequate economic strategies.⁴³

In fact, by 1983, conflicts on the future of Nicaragua's economic policy had emerged. Faced with a lack of access to foreign currency, Sandinista politicians began to question whether an expansive social policy was still possible. This contentious discussion among political leaders and experts lasted for several

38 R. Garst, *La ayuda alimentaria al istmo centroamericano*, Colección Temas de Seguridad Alimentaria 13 (Panamá, 1992), cuadro 15. The data are based on the statistics from the Nicaraguan Ministry of Exterior Cooperation.

39 K. Christiaens, 'Between diplomacy and solidarity: western European support networks for Sandinista Nicaragua', 21 (4) (2014).

40 S. Barraclough et al., *Aid that Counts: The Western Contribution to Development and Survival in Nicaragua*, 73.

41 *Barricada*, 'RDA entrega el trigo donado', 9 June 1981, 1, 5. Documentation from German state archives reveals that the GDR competed eagerly with Federal Germany to provide food aid, as diplomats from both German states saw this as a means of portraying a positive image of their political system. Each carefully observed every step their rivals made.

42 This expectation was not entirely fulfilled as Nicaragua could not deliver all the promised products during the mid 1980s.

43 Müller, Bericht über die Beratertätigkeit Monat Jan./Feb. 1985, 11.2.1985; Müller, Bericht über die Beratertätigkeit im Zeitraum November/Dezember 1984, 10.12.1984. BArch DE 1/58123.

years. Alejandro Martínez-Cuenca, foreign trade minister, favoured an adjustment solution, while others still dwelt on structuralist approaches. With elections in 1984, they postponed making a decision until 1985, when the first signs of hyperinflation were already becoming visible. In February 1985, the Sandinistas launched the first economic adjustment package, including budget cuts, the elimination of most food subsidies, increased taxes and a devaluation of the Nicaraguan currency. With the new economic strategy, food policy became less important.⁴⁴

While external advisers' early publications about Nicaragua's food policy had been overwhelmingly positive, by the mid 1980s their evaluations had become more critical. Joseph Collins' third, extended version of his book, published in 1986, openly expressed his disillusionment. First, he argued, food policy was no longer a political priority. Next, he strongly criticised the reliance on technology and large-scale production which meant that small producers received only limited technological support. Finally, he said, PAN suffered from bureaucratic chaos, inadequately educated staff and a lack of resources.⁴⁵ By that point, researchers' interest in publishing on Sandinista food policy had also faded away. Although basic elements of the policy, such as the distribution system, still existed, the economic crisis weakened the system's capacities. The Sandinistas launched increasingly militant campaigns blaming external enemies, such as the speculators, for the scarcity of goods.

The erosion of Sandinista food policy, 1988–90

The situation steadily worsened in the second half of the 1980s. Between 1985 and 1987, Nicaraguans faced an 85 per cent erosion of real wages. The government was incapable of halting inflation, which reached 747 per cent in 1986; 1,347 per cent in 1987 and 33,000 in 1988.⁴⁶ The crisis eroded the country's food policy and the capacity to store and manage food donations.

Many products were not available through official supply channels, obliging people either to search for substitutes or pay exorbitant prices on the black market. In spite of all the Sandinistas' efforts to bring the Managuan Oriental market under control, informal trade continued to grow, as official wages did not keep up with inflation. Many state employees reduced their working hours so as to engage in other survival activities. Criticism grew hand-in-hand with eroding living standards, eventually even by the FSLN newspaper in 1987. Several writers, such as the Nicaraguan poet Gioconda Belli, rejected the official interpretation that speculation was the main enemy of the revolution and suggested the reintroduction of food subsidies.⁴⁷

44 A. Martínez Cuenca, *Sandinista Economies in Practice*, 65–6; Ramírez, *Adiós Muchachos*, 166; Sola Montserrat, *Un siglo y medio*, 100–1; J. Ricciardi, 'Economic policy', 247–73.

45 Collins, *Nicaragua*, 154–64.

46 Ricciardi, 'Economic policy', 261; D. Close, *Nicaragua: The Chamorro Years*, 128–9.

47 G. Belli: '¿Quiénes son los especuladores?', *Barricada*, 25 Feb. 1987. Similar doubts about the line between commerce, illegal speculation and poor people's activities were raised by D.

After the first adjustment measures, the government's economic policy continued to divide leading Sandinista politicians. The government consulted external advisers, among them the US economist Lance Taylor from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and Daniel Ibarra Muñoz, the former treasury secretary for Mexico, who worked as a consultant for the Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe (CEPAL). By 1988, the Central American peace negotiations had advanced to the stage where the Sandinistas believed that the conflict could be settled and the time for economic reforms had come. Finally, the market and structural adjustment advocates won out.⁴⁸

In February 1988, the government introduced a first adjustment package that included a 10 per cent budget cut, the dismissal of 8,000 public employees and the introduction of a new currency. It soon became apparent that the measures were not enough to stop inflation. As people continued to suffer from poor supply lines and unaffordable prices, they lost confidence in the government's economic policy. In June 1988, a second adjustment package was implemented that devalued the new currency and introduced higher prices for public services, wage liberalisation and the elimination of the last food subsidy for milk.⁴⁹ Still the economic situation did not improve. Furthermore, measures to alleviate the social crisis had only limited effects.⁵⁰ In October 1988, Hurricane Joan hit the country, an additional blow to the Nicaraguan economy. The hurricane shattered the Caribbean coast, causing a total of more than US\$839 million worth of damage.⁵¹

The 1988 adjustment was a radical turning point, as the influence of market mechanisms in the mixed economy increased. Simultaneously, the Sandinistas reduced the scope of their expansive social policy. A closer look at PAN shows that Nicaragua's food policy was eroded during the transition that began in 1988. While PAN's shrinking number of employees still drew up ambitious plans to attract foreign funding, the institutional capacity for their implementation was limited. As Harald Juch, a German development cooperation employee remembers, the staff lacked nutritional knowledge and showed no interest in engaging in public education campaigns any more. At the same time, a large corruption scandal affected the programme.⁵² Similarly, ENABAS adapted to

Martínez, 'Reintegrar al trabajo a los especuladores', *Barricada*, 26 Feb. 1987, 3.

48 Martínez Cuenca, *Sandinista Economies*, 69–73.

49 Close, *Nicaragua: The Chamorro Years*, 124–5; G. Dijkstra, *Industrialization in Sandinista Nicaragua: Policy and Practice in a Mixed Economy*, 136–9; Anlage 3: Übersicht über die Maßnahmen zur weiteren Durchführung der Wirtschaftsreformen, Stand vom 10.10.1988. BArch DE 1/58121.

50 To alleviate the social effects of the crisis, the government introduced a wage increase of 500 per cent, on the face of it a high amount. However, the real wage increase was estimated at just 200 per cent as the new wage system eliminated other incentives. Dr Bothe, ZK-Berater, Nicaragua an Dr Schürer, Vorsitzender der Staatlichen Planungskommission, 25.2.1988. BArch DE 1/58122; Dijkstra, *Industrialization in Sandinista Nicaragua*, 136–9.

51 CEPAL, 'Damage caused by Hurricane Joan in Nicaragua', 3.

52 H. Juch, 'Unser revolutionärer Alltag: Teil 2', Tagebuch Comics Zeichnungen Fotos, unpublished manuscript, 1989, 7–13.

market mechanisms and abandoned the goal of equal access to distribution points and storage facilities.

The economic crisis reversed the social advances of the early revolutionary years. Average caloric intakes for Nicaraguans fell continuously until 1989. Between 1976 and 1986, the average per capita caloric intake in Nicaragua had ranged between 2,000 and nearly 2,400 kilocalories (kcal). In 1986, it started to fall: first to 1,932 kcal in 1987, then to 1,610 kcal in 1988 and finally to 1,591 kcal in 1989 – a 22.5 per cent decline.⁵³ By 1988, average caloric intakes had fallen below 1,800 kcal, which is below the current FAO's definition of hunger.⁵⁴ Health surveys also indicated that malnutrition among children had once again increased.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, Sandinista leaders refrained from mentioning hunger in internal political propaganda, as this would have been a public acknowledgement of failure. The economic crisis and the hurricane also strongly affected food production.

The devastation caused by Hurricane Joan led to the erosion of 10,000 hectares of arable land, and destroyed seeds, food processing facilities, warehouses and storage units. In total, 15,700 head of cattle, 15,000 pigs and 460,000 head of poultry were killed, further adding to the country's grave meat shortages. The CEPAL diagnosed 'a serious food shortage' and estimated that agricultural production would decline by 17 per cent.⁵⁶ Moreover, the lack of fertilisers and other agricultural inputs mainly affected the large-scale production of rice, milk and meat. For example, milk production declined by 64.9 per cent and beef production by 38.1 per cent between 1978 and 1989. Rice production had increased by 1982, but then fell by 40.8 per cent between 1982 and 1989.⁵⁷ Despite increasing the production of corn and beans after 1987 – a marker of the success of the new peasant strategy – the overall situation remained disastrous. Food aid reached a new peak of more than 185 million tons in 1988. These donations temporarily alleviated the situation but could not resolve the supply crisis.⁵⁸ As the Sandinistas realised that wages at state institutions did not allow people to make ends meet, they introduced a special aid package guaranteeing low-cost basic food to around 190,000 state employees.⁵⁹ This measure was

53 Program Briefing Paper for Potential CARE Food Assistance Activities in Nicaragua, 4 Apr. 1990, Box 1218, CARE Archives. Protein consumption levels ranged from 50.7 to 56.3 grams (g) between 1976–85, fell to 49.8 g in 1986 and then to 37.6 g in 1989. CARE obtained these data from PAN.

54 FAO defines hunger as the inability of a person to acquire sufficient food for more than a year, taking a minimum level of kilocalories as an indicator. The organisation establishes the average need at 2,100 kilocalories per person.

55 As the economic crisis also undermined the state's capacity to generate reliable data, surveys sometimes only cover limited samples, which makes comparisons difficult.

56 CEPAL, 'Damage caused by Hurricane Joan in Nicaragua', 10.

57 Data from FAOSTAT, <http://faostat3.fao.org/home/E> (accessed 23 Apr. 2019).

58 Garst, *La ayuda alimentaria al istmo centroamericano*, cuadro 15.

59 The AFA (*arroz, frijoles, azúcar*) package included ten pounds of rice, ten pounds of beans and five pounds of sugar per month.

meant to ensure that government institutions could keep working, but it left vulnerable groups unprotected.

Far from Managua, global political changes indicated that aid from the Eastern bloc would decline, a fact that local Soviet advisers communicated to Sandinista politicians.⁶⁰ Owing to the crisis Hurricane Joan had left in its wake, the government introduced a third adjustment programme in early 1989, which drastically slashed state expenditure by 44 per cent. As a consequence, the government dismissed a further 35,000 state employees and reduced its responsibility for state enterprises.⁶¹ During the peace process negotiations in February 1989, the Sandinistas agreed to bring the national elections forward to February 1990, meaning that 1989 became a pre-electoral period. In their election campaign the opposition argued that the United States would revive economic aid if they were to win, thereby improving the prospects for the Nicaraguan economy.⁶² To counter this, Sandinista political propaganda claimed that Soviet support would definitely continue, even though the leadership knew this was not the case. Sandinista politicians continued to honour Soviet diplomats with reception ceremonies for donations, even as the political transformation of the Eastern bloc began.⁶³

Contemporary surveys on adjustment policies indicate Nicaraguans' growing disillusionment and discontent. For example, the ITZANI research institute interviewed more than a thousand people in five Managuan districts in spring 1989. Two-thirds perceived their personal economic situation to be worse than the year before. Only 20 per cent viewed the economic policy as good, with more than 70 per cent expressing a critical opinion: 24 per cent judged the situation as bad, 14 per cent as terrible and 36 per cent as indifferent. Finally, 25 per cent believed that the government was unwilling to find a solution for the country's economic problems.⁶⁴ The poor economic situation, combined with people's desire for peace, contributed to the Sandinista electoral defeat.

Overall, Sandinista food policy embarked on a course to becoming more self-sufficient, but faced a dependency dilemma. Given the scarcity of resources, the promotion of basic grain production would have weakened the agro-export sector which generated foreign exchange. Hence, the Sandinistas followed an alternative course which also reflected the existence of different factions within government institutions. Visions of giant state enterprises producing food proved unsuccessful, while peasants' expectations that they would receive individual landholdings were fulfilled too late. After the shift to peasant production and the liberalisation of basic grain prices in the mid 1980s, the production of corn and

60 D.M. Ferrero Blanco, 'Daniel Ortega y Mijail Gorbachov: Nicaragua y la URSS en los últimos años de la Guerra Fría (1985–1990)'.

61 Ricciardi, 'Economic policy', 266–7.

62 Close, *Nicaragua: The Chamorro Years*, 126.

63 *Barricada*, 'Llega embarque de arroz URSS a San Juan del Sur', 24 Jan. 1990, 6.

64 J.W. Soule, 'The economic austerity packages of 1988 and their impact on public opinion', *International Journal of Political Economy*, Fall (1990).

beans did increase. However, this success came too late and was too limited to guarantee the growing Nicaraguan population access to basic food. This failure undermined the government's campaigns to strengthen the consumption of local food.

After the 1990 elections, the deepening social crisis and occasional price shocks continued to affect the Nicaraguan people. By 1992 some 50 per cent of the population was suffering from malnutrition. The UNO (National Opposition Union) government led by President Violeta Chamorro (1990–7) followed a neoliberal economic policy that was supported by a new influx of US economic aid and the cooperation of international financial organisations. Although the nutritional situation was severe, the food policy of the Chamorro government was left at the margins. International organisations, such as the FAO, criticised the strong external dependency of the Nicaraguan food system.⁶⁵ A limited number of Sandinista projects were continued by NGOs in the 1990s, while agricultural organisations fought to improve the situation in the countryside. During the late 1990s and early 2000s, food policy focused on fighting the consequences of Hurricane Mitch, which hit the country in 1998 and caused another food crisis. Corruption scandals discredited ENABAS and President Arnoldo Alemán (1997–2002) exploited food aid for electoral purposes.⁶⁶

Although initially the FSLN deeply opposed the UNO government, after a year it had taken a more conciliatory stance. By the late 1990s, the FSLN had already abandoned its aim of revolutionary change and entered into an alliance with the governing Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (PLC), which can only be explained by the profound transformation of the party throughout the 1990s. Some of the FSLN leadership joined the country's economic elite by taking control of state property during the political transition, a process commonly known as the *piñata*.⁶⁷

In 2006, thanks to electoral reforms established during the pact period, Daniel Ortega won the elections with 38 per cent of the vote and once again became president. Researchers have characterised his second presidency as a new *caudillismo* or a 'populist left regime with hybrid economic features'.⁶⁸ Contrary to other left-wing Latin American governments, Ortega has maintained more institutional continuity and refrained from a strong redistributive policy, eschewing nationalisation, land reform or price controls.⁶⁹ Nevertheless,

65 FAO, Representación en Nicaragua, 'Informe Anual: Julio 92 a Junio 93', 1–2; FAO, Representación en Nicaragua, 'Informe Anual: Julio/94 a Junio/95', 10–11.

66 Nitlápán–Envío Team, 'Time for a pact or time for a reflection?', *Envío*, no. 204, July 1998; J.L. Rocha and I. Cristoplos, 'Las ONGs ante los desastres naturales: vacíos y oportunidades', *Envío*, no. 212, Nov. 1999.

67 A. Pérez Baltodano, 'Political culture'; Ramírez, *Adiós Muchachos*, 32; A. Zamora, 'Some reflections on the piñata', *Envío*, no. 180, July 1996.

68 Spalding, *Contesting Trade*, 208.

69 *Ibid.*, 208–10.

his government initiated an anti-poverty policy that was much broader than previous governments' efforts. The new government's package included programs such as Zero Usury and Zero Hunger. The basis for this policy was Nicaragua's new alliance with ALBA-TCP (*Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América – Tratado de Comercio de los Pueblos*),⁷⁰ whose funding permitted the expansive social policy. Ortega's new allies put fewer restrictions on economic aid than European donors, who limited their support after Ortega's 2011 unconstitutional re-election.⁷¹

Continuity and change in Sandinista food policy

The new Ortega government's food programmes display some similarities with those of the 1980s – rhetorically at least. The government included an urban gardening project in its national development plan, reactivated ENABAS and continued the corn festivals. Some continuities with the 1980s food projects do exist, for example, ENABAS launched a 'Food for the People' project with the aim of establishing a just market system.⁷² However, I argue that the heart of 1980s Sandinista food policy has not been restored: food subsidies, price regulations and land distribution are absent from the new programmes. More importantly, the neo-Sandinistas have made no attempt to break with the capitalist economy. Thus far, public debates and research have focused on the Zero Hunger Program and the food sovereignty law, because these initiatives are embedded within broader regional or global political initiatives. No systematic evaluation of Nicaraguan food politics has been made since 2006, so what follows is a broad summary of the most important trends until 2016.

The 1980s Sandinista food policy laid the groundwork for the food sovereignty debate by prioritising locally produced food and demanding the right to shape the local food system. Furthermore, the Sandinista Revolution left a legacy of active peasant organisations mobilising for change and debating agrarian issues. During the 1980s, these peasant organisations and conferences on agrarian reforms established a process of exchange that favoured the rise of the LVC (the transnational peasant movement), with the *Asociación de Trabajadores en el Campo* (ATC) and the *Union Nacional de Agricultores y Ganaderos* (UNAG) as founding members.⁷³ In 1997, Sandinista deputy Dora Zeledón launched the first initiative for a food security law. The proposal rejected the

70 The alliance was founded in 2004 by Venezuela and Cuba as an alternative to the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). The two nations agreed on terms for the petroleum trade and intensified exchanges in the areas of health and education. Later, Bolivia in 2006, Nicaragua in 2007, Ecuador in 2009 and several Caribbean nations joined ALBA.

71 S. Martí i Puig and D. Close, 'The Nicaraguan exception?', 299–300. E.g., Denmark ended bilateral development cooperation with Nicaragua in 2012, while other countries, such as Germany and Finland, announced their intention to evaluate and reduce their programmes.

72 *Alianza de los pequeños productores organizados, con ENABAS y los CPC, 'Creación de Red de Mercado Justo'*, 2007.

73 W. Godek, 'Challenges for food sovereignty policy making: the case of Nicaragua's law 693'.

perception of food as merchandise and suggested that 50 per cent of Nicaragua's food supply should be provided by national production. Food aid distribution, which the law considered to be 'unfair competition' for local production, would be limited to exceptional supply crises resulting from natural disasters and other unforeseen events.⁷⁴ In the years after 1997, although the initial proposal was modified several times, the government of President Enrique Bolaños (2002–7) remained unwilling to pass the legislation.

In Nicaragua, the concept of food sovereignty gained traction after the 2001 World Forum on Food Sovereignty. From then on, LVC member organisations began to discuss a new initiative for a food sovereignty law. In 2004, 40 organisations from Nicaraguan civil society founded the Grupo de Interés Soberanía y Seguridad Alimentaria y Nutricional (GISSAN) to promote the law. As that name indicates, the debate over concepts continued among the initiative's supporters, because the term 'food security' seemed more familiar and concrete to many of them. In 2005, GISSAN member organisations worked on a new draft for a law that Deputy Wálmaro Gutiérrez (FSLN) introduced to the National Assembly in 2006.⁷⁵ When the National Assembly discussed the law in June 2007, the new Ortega government was already in power.

With Ortega's electoral victory, it seemed more likely that the law would be approved. However, the legislation prompted contentious discussions and National Assembly deputies rejected the law during its second reading. The private sector was particularly opposed to Article 5, which prohibited imports of genetically modified food. The business community feared that the law would also affect the implementation of the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) and convinced PLC members to oppose the project. After the first initiative failed in 2007, the FAO joined the effort and the law project was deradicalised. Those articles which permitted the creation of grain reserves and price regulations were eliminated from the draft legislation. In addition, Article 9 of the law clearly established that state policies should not touch free enterprise and commerce, which meant a surrender to market mechanisms.⁷⁶ The deradicalisation of the law reflected the government's interest in avoiding further conflicts with the private sector and the IMF. While discussions about the legislation continued, the government launched the Zero Hunger Program as a core element of its anti-poverty policy.

The Zero Hunger Program has generated a contentious debate as critics accused the Sandinistas of political favouritism. Its name was inspired by the Brazilian 'Fome Zero' programme. Launched in 2003 by President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, the programme included cash transfers for poor families, favourable interest rates for family farmers and a school meals programme. The

74 Asamblea Nacional de la República de Nicaragua, 'Iniciativa de ley "Ley de Seguridad Alimentaria"', unpublished manuscript, 1998.

75 Godek, 'The institutionalization of food sovereignty', 175–81.

76 B. Müller, 'The loss of harmony: FAO guidance for food security in Nicaragua'; Godek, 'Challenges for food sovereignty policy making'.

Nicaraguan project, however, had a narrower focus, mainly providing peasants with the necessary basic inputs for food production. It distributed a package of animals, seeds and construction materials worth US\$2,000 to 75,000 peasant families. Critics bemoaned the programme's lack of transparency with regard to the selection of beneficiaries, as well as the fact that it was not incorporated into a broader strategy against malnutrition. A 2007/2008 evaluation suggests that the selection criteria for the programme were too vague, allowing political considerations to play a role, which in turn led to regions in Central Nicaragua such as Masaya being favoured.⁷⁷ The question of whether the focus on peasant farmers was the result of lessons learned in the 1980s, or simply an attempt to jump on the bandwagon of the Brazilian initiative, remains the subject of further research.⁷⁸

Efforts to revive 1980s projects are also visible in food distribution and urban gardening. The state distribution agency ENABAS resisted privatisation during the 1990s, but its capacities were significantly reduced. The neo-Sandinista government revived the enterprise and started reconstructing food storage facilities with ALBA funding. In addition, ENABAS launched the Programa Nacional de Distribución de Alimentos para el pueblo, which aimed to create a new network of state distribution points. According to the enterprise's homepage, it has founded more than 3,800 distribution points in about a hundred Nicaraguan municipalities.⁷⁹ However, no systematic research has been conducted on the programme's effects.

Three years after taking over government, the Sandinistas also relaunched urban gardening projects. Starting in 2010, with two projects in Los Laureles district in Managua and Ciudad Sandino, the so-called Healthy Backyard Program was incorporated into the national development plan for 2012 to 2016.⁸⁰ During that period, the idea was that 250,000 gardens would be involved throughout the country. The gardening projects also aimed at increasing fruit and vegetable consumption. Evaluations by geographer Laura Shillington demonstrate that local inhabitants sometimes disagreed with international project staff about which plants would be most beneficial for their gardens.⁸¹

The idea of strengthening local food consumption is also visible at the corn festivals. After the Sandinista defeat these festivals had continued at the regional level and became more touristic. In Jalapa and Matagalpa, especially, the tradition remained strong. Between 2005 and 2015 their mottoes have emphasised

77 P. Kester, *Informe evaluativo (2007–2008): Programa Productivo Alimentario (PPA) 'Hambre Cero'*, 17; Spalding, 'Poverty politics'.

78 Rose Spalding argues that the government launched the Zero Hunger Program having possibly learned from its experiences in the 1980s. *Ibid.*, 233.

79 <https://web.archive.org/web/20170426210719/http://www.enabas.gob.ni/enabas> (accessed on 2 July 2019).

80 FAO, 'Urban and peri-urban agriculture in Latin America and the Caribbean: Managua'.

81 L.J. Shillington, 'Right to food, right to the city: household urban agriculture, and socionatural metabolism in Managua'.

Nicaragua's role as a significant corn producer, for example '*La gran milpa de Nicaragua*' (2008) or '*Jalapa con su maíz ... orgullo de mi país!*' (2009).⁸² At the 2011 corn festival in Matagalpa, the local FSLN mayor clearly favoured the food sovereignty movement. He argued staunchly that it was necessary to rescue Nicaraguan culinary traditions for future generations, and that its food was a patrimonial value of Nicaraguan culture and formed part of the country's food sovereignty.⁸³ After 1999, corn production increased significantly, peaking in 2003, and fluctuating between 443,700 and 545,938 tons in the following years.⁸⁴

In the last two decades, basic grain production has increased, reducing the dependency of the Nicaraguan food system on external sources. In 2011/2012, Nicaragua was among the least dependent Central American countries in terms of basic grain trade.⁸⁵ However, per capita food availability decreased after 2004 owing to low yields, which could create further supply problems in the future.⁸⁶

Compared to the early 1990s, the nutritional situation in Nicaragua has improved considerably in the last two decades. Rates of malnutrition fell from 50 per cent (1990–2) to 38 per cent (1995–7) to 25 per cent (2000–2). According to recent FAO data, the situation has improved further with a reduction in malnutrition from 22.3 per cent in 2007 to 16.6 per cent in 2015.⁸⁷ However, undernourishment is still a major problem. Between 2009 and 2013, an average of 23 per cent of Nicaraguan children suffered from chronic malnutrition.⁸⁸ In rural areas, the situation remains depressing, with poverty rates exceeding 50 per cent.⁸⁹

Conclusion

The Sandinista Revolution established ambitious aims: to break with export dependency, democratise access to food and guarantee all Nicaraguans a basic supply of food. In the early revolutionary years, the government and mass organisations designed creative campaigns, which mobilised thousands of people, with the goal of ensuring local food security. The Sandinista policy also gained the support of international organisations, such as the FAO, WHO

82 *El Nuevo Diario*, 'Preparan feria del maíz en Jalapa', 28 Aug. 2008; *El Nuevo Diario*, 'Jalapa con su maíz... orgullo de Nicaragua', 17 Sept. 2009.

83 Transcription from my sound recording at the event, Apr. 2011.

84 Statistics from FAOSTAT, <http://faostat3.fao.org/home/E> (accessed 23 Apr. 2019). The peak production in 2003 was 588,599 tons, followed by 443,730 tons in 2004 and 545,938 tons in 2013.

85 FAO, 'Panorama de la seguridad alimentaria y nutricional en América Latina y el Caribe 2011: altos precios de los alimentos: oportunidades y riesgos', 2011, 63–6.

86 G. Bornemann et al., 'Desafíos desde la seguridad alimentaria y nutricional en Nicaragua', 34.

87 Statistics from FAOSTAT, <http://faostat3.fao.org/browse/D/FS/E> (accessed 23 Apr. 2019).

88 Unicef, 'At a glance: Nicaragua', www.unicef.org/infobycountry/nicaragua_statistics.html (accessed 23 Apr. 2019).

89 INIDE, 'Results of the National Households Survey on Measurement of Level of Life, 2014', 2015, <http://www.inide.gob.ni/Emnv/Emnv14/Poverty%20Results%202014.pdf> (accessed 23 Apr. 2019).

and UNICEF. In addition, bilateral development cooperation fostered many revolutionary projects to increase food production. However, these ambitious plans faced enormous challenges because of the dependency of the Nicaraguan economy on agro exports, war and the economic blockade. Moreover, Sandinista agrarian policy remained contradictory. Until the mid 1980s, it promoted large-scale, modern agriculture, while giving peasants less support. This was one of the reasons why basic grain production did not expand as rapidly as it should have done.

Within the Central American context of the early 1980s, Nicaragua's food policy, with its strong focus on self-sufficiency, was exceptional. Looking at other Global South countries, however, it is possible to identify similarities with the Nicaraguan approach. After attaining political independence in the 1950s and 1960s, many Asian and African countries developed self-sufficiency projects. Political independence was linked to economic independence and control of food resources. As in Nicaragua, these countries struggled to find a balance between self-sufficiency, food aid and Green Revolution strategies. Research on these self-sufficiency projects has not yet been completed, and it is not clear whether experts from the international nutrition community were involved in these efforts. The evidence for Nicaragua indicates that, starting from the early 1980s, international organisations and bilateral support from individual countries influenced strategic decision-making about food policy.

Nicaragua is a prime example of the many small countries with dependent economies in the Global South that experienced regime changes and became Cold War hotspots in the 20th century. After 1979, experts from both Cold War blocs struggled for influence over Sandinista politics in different areas. Products from both fronts of the Cold War entered Nicaraguan territory in the form of food aid, a phenomenon that was extensive in Central America but also happened in other Global South countries.

During a short honeymoon period, international organisations and NGOs promoted Nicaragua as a model for food policy in the Global South, and Nicaragua disseminated proposals for self-sufficiency and regional food security alliances at international conferences. These ambitious projects, however, faced serious economic limitations: the nation's dependency on agro exports generated conflicts around resources, basic grain production did not expand sufficiently, and tensions weakened the relationship between Sandinistas and the peasants.

By 1985, the Nicaraguan economy had entered a severe crisis and the supply situation became steadily worse. Because of this, the Sandinista government had to rely increasingly on food imports and aid, which undermined the self-sufficiency project. The reliance on donations also implied a growing surrender to the donors' political agendas, visible in the numerous reception ceremonies for food aid. With the 1988 adjustment programmes, the ambitious food policy was completely eroded. The financial crisis reversed state institutions' capacity to store food, manage the incoming donations, and implement the projects financed by external donors. Simultaneously, the strengthening of market

mechanisms reversed the democratisation of the food distribution network. Finally, the failure of the Sandinistas to guarantee a stable basic food supply during the crisis years contributed significantly to its electoral defeat in 1990. In the early 1990s, the UNO government neglected food policy, despite widespread malnutrition. At the same time, the food system remained highly dependent on imports whose lower prices harmed local food producers who were unable to compete.

However, the Sandinistas Revolution left an active network of peasant organisations that continued to mobilise for social change. They contributed to the campaign for a food sovereignty law in the early 2000s. The close collaboration between the Sandinistas and FAO in the 1980s had introduced the principle of food security into Nicaraguan politics. Later on, important elements of the Sandinista food policy were taken up by the food sovereignty movement, such as the priority for locally produced food, agrarian reform and the autonomous definition of the local food system. After the 2001 World Forum on Food Sovereignty, the issues of food security and food sovereignty were debated intensely in Nicaragua. With the FSLN electoral victory, favourable conditions for the proposed legislation seemed to have arrived, but in the event, the law was passed in a watered-down form.

Although names and rhetoric are similar, the framework for neo-Sandinista food policy differs from that of the 1980s. While the Sandinistas based their policy on the idea of a mixed economy, the Ortega government and the new Sandinista economic elites have accepted capitalism and adapted their policies accordingly, taking care not to endanger agreements with the IMF or violate CAFTA rules. Unlike other Latin American left-wing governments, the Ortega government has not embarked on profound changes in economic structures or land distribution. Nevertheless, social policy is a higher priority than it was for previous Nicaraguan governments. In fact, poverty and malnutrition from 2005 to 2015 decreased significantly. Moreover, Nicaragua has become less dependent on grain imports than other Central American countries. However, reliance on external sources is still a problem: the Ortega government changed the country's foreign alliances, which created a dependency on ALBA funding. The deep economic crisis in Venezuela has made ALBA support more uncertain, which might also endanger the neo-Sandinistas' social policy. Because of this, malnutrition could rise again, given Nicaragua's vulnerability to natural disasters, dependency on volatile external resources and low basic grains productivity.

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